

Cohesion Through Diversity

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Thank you for that introduction.

I'm delighted to be here.

For the past 40 years I've been creating a type of learning experiences called simulations. In the type I design, groups of 30 to 40 people interact from 3 to 8 hours within a set of rules designed to create emotions and challenges that are similar to real life. During this time they do such activities as set goals, allocate resources, negotiate, compete for resources, make alliances, use or abuse power and, in general, try to solve problems or meet challenges that develop during the experience.

These simulations have a game like quality, but I don't like to refer to them as games, as games almost always have a zero sum outcome. In other words, one group or individual wins and another loses. In the simulation there may be winners and losers, but more often than not, if the groups and individuals cooperate everyone can win.

BaFa' BaFa', one of the most popular simulations I've created, was designed to give people the same kinds of feelings one gets when experiencing another culture.

I believe the person who learns the most from a simulation is the person who designed it. To design one, one must research the topic, try out many different prototypes, and view the topic from many different perspectives. It is an ideal way to learn about individuals and groups because you are always asking yourself, how will the participants react to this rule, requirement or situation? And, how will they respond to the behavior and decisions that the other individuals and groups during the simulation? Then, in the case of BaFa' BaFa' once it was developed, I was able to observe the way participants responded to the rules and one another, during the thousands of times I or colleagues ran it with different groups. In effect, the design and application of the simulation is like a laboratory that helps one understand human behavior.

I believe the general experience of designing games and the specific experience of designing BaFa' BaFa' has given me valuable and unique insights into the behavior of groups of people. It is these insights that the proposal I will be making today is based upon.

What I'd like to do today is explore the possibility of expanding the notion of cultural competency to include building a work culture that creates cohesion through diversity.

I want to be clear that my focus is *not* how to adapt when travelling to another culture. That is a completely different situation than what I'm concerned about today. That is not to say that those experiences are not valuable, in fact, they provide the basis for much of what we need to apply in the situations I'm concerned with today.

My focus in this talk is on organizations, businesses, volunteer groups, or any other group made up of people from different cultures for the purpose of creating common cause whether that is a product, a service, or a benefit for the community. To develop this skill a person needs to know and understand different cultures as well as know how to apply the basic principles of organizational development and leadership.

Today I'm going to:

1. Describe a Chinese wedding my wife and I attended to give a specific example of the types of issues and concerns one encounters when interacting with another culture.
2. Give an overview of the types of cultural practices that are likely to create problems in the workplace and need to be considered when developing a "cohesion through diversity" work culture,
3. Identify some strategies to implement the proposed cohesion through diversity culture in the workplace.

Cohesion Through Diversity

Cultural competency generally refers to the ability of an individual to communicate with, understand and work effectively with people from other cultures. The emphasis has been on the individual. I think we should consider expanding the definition to also include the ability of a person to *create* a work culture in which people from different cultures, feel safe, feel valued and are able to contribute their personal best to meet shared goals.

The basic assumption of this approach to cultural competency is that everyone needs to agree to be bi-cultural. Each person would continue to be a member of his or her culture of birth and also agree to be a member of the new work culture. I call this the "cohesion through diversity culture".

What do I mean by culture? I think of culture as the way different groups of people have solved common problems.

Groups needed to communicate with one another, so they invented language. They needed to survive so they discovered different ways of getting nutrition which in turn led to different ways of cooking food, and so on. A definition of a work culture, which I like, is: "The way we do things around here".

Culture as a concept is very difficult to grasp when one isn't interacting with other cultures. It's very easy to believe that everyone does things pretty much the same way as I do with the same values and the same behaviors.

If we are going to be successful in establishing a culture through diversity, we need to become meta-thinkers. In other words, we need to take the fish out of the water so the fish can see the water and understand what's going on in the water.

I try to do meta-thinking all the time. It's very difficult to do with one's own culture. It's much easier to do when one encounters another culture. I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago. My son is married to a Taiwanese woman. Her brother got married and my wife and I were invited to the wedding via a multi-layered, multi-colored and multi-folded invitation.

The first decision we had to make was what kind of a gift shall we give the bride and groom. We first thought of a toaster. We always think of a toaster. It's warm, it's functional and it's something everyone needs. And, they're all kinds of toasters. You can give a basic pop-up toaster or you can give one that also grills hamburgers and connects to the internet.

We had one all picked out but we thought we should call our daughter-in-law and ask her if a toaster would be an appropriate gift. We think of her as our most reliable cultural guide when it comes to the Taiwanese culture, but she was out of town so we asked our son.

"Help us out here, Phil, we're thinking of giving Kevin and his bride a toaster. Actually, it's a very nice toaster; I would even call it an upscale toaster. I think they would like it, what do you think?"

He said dad, “the Chinese generally give money as wedding gifts. I don't think a toaster would be that wonderful.”

Well then, I said, “We'll just give them the amount of money equal to the value of the toaster”.

My son asked how much that would be and when I told him, he said he should probably check it out with Leslie his wife. A few days later he came back and said, “well there's kind of a formula for members of the extended family and the formula for your gift would be substantially more than the price of your toaster. He told us the amount and said, “but it's your decision. “

And then he added, “whatever amount you decide on, be sure to put the money in a red envelope and at the wedding look for the person who is designated to collect the red envelopes. It could be embarrassing if you gave the envelope to the wrong person.”

And by the way, “Sometimes they announce the amount that a person has given as a gift. Do you want the amount of your gift announced?”

“No, no, no’ I said, “that's ok, we'd prefer it wasn't announced.”

We were so grateful we'd sought the help of our son and daughter-in-law to be our cultural guides. I could imagine us being at the wedding and the master of ceremonies announcing, “Mr. Chang and his wife gave a gift of \$1000 dollars to the bride and groom. And next, let's see, oh yes, Mr. and Mrs. Shirts gave a gift of one GE pop up toaster.”

On the day of the wedding, we were about ready to get in the car when I thought, I'd better check on the internet to see what one wears to Chinese weddings.

I found a site that gives information about specific cultures and it said, “don't wear black and white to a Chinese wedding, those colors represent death.”

I shut down the computer and looked at my wife. She had a *black* skirt on with a *white* blouse. And I had on my *black* suit with a *white* shirt. We were going to the wedding as:

Mr. and Mrs. Death.

It's two hours and 15 minutes before the wedding begins and Mapquest said it would take us 2 hours 17 minutes and 22 seconds to get there if we drove the speed limit.

What should we do? Was it better to be Mr. and Mrs. Death or be late for the wedding? We decided to change our clothes even though in the panic of the moment, we couldn't think of anything to change to.

Eventually we found something. My wife changed into a gold blouse and brown slacks, which she hates, and I switched to a light checkered coat and gray pants.

We dashed out the door, and I drove very fast. We arrived at this very fancy resort with valet parking with just minutes to spare.

We ran through the gigantic hotel. There were wedding parties everywhere. We finally found the wedding site; it was on a beautiful knoll overlooking the ocean. Whew, the wedding hadn't started yet. In fact, people were still

arriving. We took a deep breath and slipped into the seats at the back. But as soon as we sat down our daughter-in-law came and said, “you are part of the family, and you have designated seats. They are up front just behind my parents” and she pointed to a couple of empty chairs.

She was our most trusted cultural guide. We did exactly what she said.

When our son got married, our daughter-in law’s parents told us we were now members of the family and there was a special way we greet one another. I was to address one of her parents as Tseum (sp) and address the other as Chingay (sp).

As we moved to the front, we met Leslie's parents. In the stress of the moment I couldn't remember whether the mother was supposed to be addressed as Tseum or Chingay.

Just as I approached her, it came back to me. I greeted her with a bow and said, Tseum. She bowed slightly back and said tseum.

Whew!

We sat down and looked around. Almost every man there had a black suit and a white shirt on and there were probably 15 women with white blouses and black skirts including several relatives in the wedding party. In fact, I am the only man at the wedding with a light colored coat on.

Thanks Mr. Cross cultural website.

We had a great time at the wedding, which was part American, and part Chinese and part the family’s own invention. In Chinese fashion, the bride made a grand entrance in three different dresses of different colors. Then after the dancing to both Chinese and American music she threw her bouquet back over her head to the single women in the group and he took off the brides' garter with his teeth and threw it to the young bachelors at the party. Not something that’s done at traditional Chinese weddings.

We had a great time at the wedding. Even though we couldn't speak Chinese we got along fine by talking in sign language to the two nieces who were at our table and several of the other guests at our table that did not speak English.

In effect, what had happened is somewhat akin to what I am suggesting with the development of culture that creates cohesion through diversity. We were all participating in a third culture. It wasn't totally Chinese it wasn't totally American it was unique to this situation. In effect everyone was bicultural.

Cultural Practices That Are Likely to Cause Conflict in the Workplace

I know that when communicating, working with and relating to people from other cultures the easy part is the visible or explicit part of the culture. What should we wear? How do we greet people? Where do we sit? What kinds of gifts to give. That's the easy part.

The more difficult challenge is the hidden part of culture. It is what creates most of the problems in the work place. The parts of the culture that even the people in the culture may not be aware of. Edward T. Hall wrote a classic about cross-cultural relations titled the *Hidden Dimension*. If you are going to read one book about culture it is the most important one to read in my opinion. He more, than anyone else, helped us understand the hidden dimensions of culture.

If we’re going to be culturally competent and create a work culture in which every person feels safe, valued and

is able to maximize his or her productivity, we need to understand these hidden dimensions and be able to make them visible so we can talk about them and reach agreement for what behaviors should be encouraged in the cohesion through diversity culture. If we don't have an understanding of them or don't even know they exist, we can't do anything about them because we don't know they are there.

Here are some of the hidden dimensions, in my opinion, that cause many of the misunderstandings and cross-cultural problems in the work place. These are the kinds of issues that a culturally competent person would need to know about to create the new work culture.

High Contract.....High Context

One summer my oldest son's family was visiting from Brazil. We were driving home from a visit to the Southwest. It was in the middle of the night, in the middle of the desert. I was driving and I came to a cross roads with a red light. I stopped for the red light. The Brazilians were half asleep; when I stopped they sat up startled and said, "What's wrong? Did we have a flat? Did we run out of gas?" I said, " No, there's a red light. "They said, "so what, you can see five miles in every direction and there's not a car in sight. It's the middle of the night. Why stop?"

The fact is, in Brazil they wouldn't stop. They wouldn't even slow down. In high context low contract cultures the context takes precedence over the social contract. I stopped because I live in the US culture, which is a high contract, low context culture. We pretty much obey the rules. They wouldn't have stopped if they were in Brazil because in their culture when there is a conflict between the contract and context, context rules.

Now if a high contract and high context person are working together there's going to be conflicts. Suppose you're working on a project and you've done about as much as you can with the materials and supplies that are currently available. The high context person might leave work because there's nothing else to do, the high contract person just might get upset because the social contract says you work to 5:00 p.m..

On the other hand, two people might be working on a project and it's not quite finished at the end of the working day the high contract person is likely to go home at 5 p.m. The high context person won't likely understand. He or she will want to stay and finish the job.

Individualistic.....Collectivistic

When it comes to being unaware of the water, we in the US do not understand the degree to which we value individual effort and freedom. We tend to view the world from the view of "I" and "me". We celebrate individual effort. This individualism is reflected in everything we do. The way we teach our children, (group work is still considered cheating in many schools); we work in small cubicles, our national anthem could be, "I did it my way".

Collectivist cultures view it as "we" and "us". Supporting the group is central to everything they do. We try to stand out from the group, they try to blend in and support the group. People wear Dilbert t-shirts with pride that say, "I am not a team player." That wouldn't be a big seller in collectivist cultures.

We have to be trained to work in teams; working in teams and groups in a collectivistic culture is as natural as breathing. These are deep-seated values and ways of looking at the world. When a person from an individualistic culture works with a person from a collectivistic culture, there's likely to be a great deal of misunderstanding, unless the different approaches to the world are made explicit, discussed and negotiated.

Perception of time.

Our view of time is sequential as it is in most high contract cultures. We do this and that and we imagine things being done along a straight time line.

Polychronic cultures don't think of time in a straight line. When I first went to Hawaii from the mainland I was made the head of the Sunday school in a Hawaiian Church. I expected that everyone would arrive at 9:00 a.m. we'd sing one song, then go to our individual groups and have a Sunday school lesson and then return and have a final song. That was my plan. It didn't quite work out that way. Ever. First no one arrived at 9:00. They would generally be 10 to 20 minutes late. And no one wanted to start until everyone got there.

When everyone arrived we would sing the opening song. At the end of the song on my first day as Sunday School superintendent, I started to stand up to tell everyone to go to their groups for their Sunday School lessons but just as they finished the song, someone in the back yelled "hana hou" which in Hawaiian means let's do it again. And then they sang all five verses again.

And then I started to stand up to make my announcement and someone over in the corner started quietly humming a new song and then another person joined in (and then pretty soon they were singing a completely new song). This continued for an hour or more, and would have continued beyond the 12:00 o'clock ending time for Sunday school, if I hadn't interceded.

Now if you are working with people who are on polychronic time and you're on sequential time, there's going to be conflict, so the culturally competent person would understand all of this and work to make these differences explicit so everyone is aware of them and can negotiate what the approach or approaches will be in the new culture.

Response to authority.

Some cultures have a very strong respect for authority, in the US we often expect people to give opinions, and evaluate practices which violates their sense of respect for authority. We often treat bosses with a familiarity that offends the sense of respect that some cultures hold for anyone in authority. Again if we are culturally competent with this new definition, we will work through the authority issues and come to agree on a set of behaviors that will make it possible for everyone to feel safe, feel valued and maximize his or her productivity.

Personal space

In the US, we tend to stand 18 inches apart. In some cultures people stand very close to one another. This practice makes many US members very nervous. Often we don't know why we feel uncomfortable and the person standing close to the American doesn't realize they're violating their personal space. Likewise a person who stands back may seem aloof and superior to the person who is from a culture in which people stand close together.

I'm suggesting the culturally competent person will make these invisible elements of the culture explicit and work out some agreement that allows everyone to feel safe, feel valued and be productive.

Touching: Some cultures touch and touch and touch. This can cause all kinds of problems if one doesn't know it's part of the culture. Both groups often misinterpret the touching behavior. The non-touchers feel invaded and the touchers feel the non-touchers are aloof.

Showing of emotions

Some cultures have very definite rules about when it is appropriate to show emotions. If we're not aware of those rules, the person from a more expressive culture can feel that the person who is not expressing emotion is disapproving. And a person from a non-expressive culture is likely to feel uncomfortable when an expressive shows what they call an excessive amount of emotion.

Negotiation styles

Understanding the way different cultures negotiate is critical not only for working well together but also for

achieving one's business and organizational goals. In the 70's the Greek government was ready to expel the American fleet because a US sailor felt that a merchant had cheated him when he discovered the merchant charged him three times the price for the same memento as his buddy. He returned to the merchant got in an argument and beat him up. He didn't understand that in the Greek culture merchants negotiate, negotiate, and negotiate. In fact, if you don't negotiate in some cultures you are seen in an unfavorable light.

There's not only the hard line type of negotiation, there's the softer type of negotiation that often occurs in small close knit cultures. One time I was riding back from helping my father-in-law plant alfalfa seeds. He had a sack of seeds left over that was 3/4 full. A neighbor approached the tractor and after some small talk said, "I see you've got a sack of seeds left. I'd like to buy it from you."

Dyle, my father-in-law said, "That's OK I'm through with it, you can have it, it's no use to me. "

"No, I want to pay you for it."

"Well, OK," Dyle said, " how about you pay me for a quarter of a sack."

"No, I want to pay you for a whole sack."

"No, that doesn't make sense It's a used sack. Pay me for a half a sack and we'll call it even. "

"No, no, no, it would cost me more if I had to drive into Loa to get me a sack so even if I pay you for a full sack I'm saving money and time."

"OK, then, pay me for 3/4 of a sack and we'll call it a deal."

"OK, that's fine with me."

If one is negotiating in that rural farming community, it's important to understand the rules for negotiating or one is likely to get a reputation for being insensitive and greedy.

Attitude towards work

Many cultures work to live. People from the US often live to work. So we make assumptions about how many hours other people should work and the sacrifices they're expected to make. These expectations can be a real source of conflict.

Territoriality

In the book, *Hidden Dimensions*, Dr. Hall tells about the time he was staying in Japanese hotel writing a book. He came back to his room after dinner and his key wouldn't work. He called down to the front desk and they said, "Oh we moved you to room 325. He went to 325 and all of his books, pencils and everything were in the exact same place they were in his other room. The hotel management didn't think of his space belonging to him. They didn't see why he would object to moving him to another room. Unlike the US where we clearly mark our territory and are ready to defend it some cultures have a very different sense of territoriality.

So it is critical for the culturally competent person to be aware of the basic cultural practices and the types of misunderstanding they are likely to create. Without this understanding, it will not be possible to surface the hidden cultural practices so they can be negotiated.

Three Levels of "Cohesion Through Diversity" Work Cultures.

Below are three levels of diversity that an organization might aspire to. Which level one chooses, would depend on the level of commitment, the cultural competence of available personnel and an organization's willingness to change.

Level One: Goals for the organization include:

This is basically, a preventive approach not a proactive approach. The organization makes it clear that behavior that makes anyone feel unsafe, excluded or demeaned is unacceptable.

- No stereotyping.

- No disparaging remarks
- No demeaning jokes.
- No excluding behavior.
- No violation of cultural taboos.
- No ascribing of malevolent motives without evidence.

Level Two: Goals for the organization include:

- A work culture is created that is basically the existing work culture adapted with as little change as possible but with the goal of creating a work culture in which every person feels safe, valued and is able to work productively.
- The goal is not only to avoid the negative but also to ensure each person in the organization is aware of the importance of being sensitive to cultural issues when working with one another and with clients.
- Developed by existing leadership with input from cultural guides within and without organization.
- Rule based rather than agreement based.

Level Three: Goals for the organization include:

- A work culture is created that has a sense of uniqueness, that is different from the dominant culture, one *everyone* has to adapt to. Everyone understands he or she must be bi-cultural. They have their birth culture and their work culture.
- Created by members of the work culture and existing leadership who understand how to create a work culture in which people from diverse backgrounds, races and cultures can feel safe, feel valued and contribute to the cultural and business goals of the organization.
- Difference between level two and three is degree of involvement by members of different work cultures and the degree of uniqueness and prominence cultural elements play in culture.
- Agreement based rather than rule based.

Creating A Cohesive Work Culture Through Diversity

So how do we create this new culture in which people with such different values, behaviors and worldviews can come together to create something valuable? It is a big challenge. It requires people to understand the importance of both common ground and diversity. Two seemingly opposite values.

There is a large body of literature on how to create and manage change in an organization. In addition to those strategies and approaches I believe there are some that are unique to creating cultural change.

- We have to help people understand just what we mean by culture and being culturally competent.
- We need to ensure that people understand some of the basic ways cultures are different and the degree to which they share common problems and goals.
- We need to understand that much of culture is implicit and that in order to change we have to make the implicit explicit.

I believe the three most important strategies are:

Effective Use of Super Ordinate Goals

Use the power of super ordinate goals to bring diverse groups together: *Encourage* everyone in work culture to work together to achieve business and work culture goals. (See Sherif study:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realistic_conflict_theory)

Keeping the focus on behavior not attitudes. Speech is behavior

Why focus on behavior:

- Can observe and measure behavior
- Can set standards for behavior
- Trying to get people to change their attitudes has been largely ineffective.
- If change behavior, attitudes will likely follow.(Basic assumption of cognitive therapists)

Understand and use the power of identity.

- Create single identity for work culture i.e., Don't form sub-groups by culture, ethnicity, race, gender preference, work assignments etc.

One organization ran BaFa' BaFa' and decided to form sub-groups based on the main ethnic racial groups in the organization i.e., a black group, a Latino group, a white group, an Asian group so each group could look out for its interests. It did not have the desired effect. In fact it tore the organization apart. Each group began competing with every other group for resources. More important, each group identified with their ethnic/racial group more than the common culture.

It's important to make everyone be part of and feel part of the new culture with symbols, badges, logos, clothing, special greetings, rituals, unique words, common experiences, art and music.

Note: As a simulation designer I've come to appreciate the power of identity. If in a simulation badges are put on a group of people, they immediately feel a kinship and are ready to compete against other groups. The bond increases with time and the intensity of the competition until by the end of the simulation they are often ready to sabotage the other group, lie, cheat, and even go against their own best interests to keep the other side from receiving a benefit. Churches, nations, armies, and coaches of teams know the power of identity. It is so powerful one must be careful and only use it to promote the common good.

Include culturally competent people in the process.

This is extremely important and likely to increase the probability of success. It is important, however, that you establish the correct expectations for participation. The point is you are asking them to bring their knowledge of culture in general to help create a second culture that makes it possible for every person to feel safe, feel included and be able to maximize his or her contribution and productivity. You're not asking them to be a representative of their birth culture, although that will be valuable, you're asking them to use all available cultural knowledge to help the organization meet its goals.

And, we need to come from a position of strength not weakness. The purpose isn't to satisfy a legal requirement, which was the focus of diversity training in the 70's and 80's; it isn't even being done because it's the moral thing to do. It's being done because, if done correctly, it can add great value to the organization and to the individuals within the organization. When people feel safe, and feel included they are more productive and creative. It makes it possible for them to tap into the creativity and energy of different ways of looking at the world, of different ways of doing things. Organizations are wasting an enormous asset when they fail to understand the value that can come from diversity.

We can be of great service if we help organizations develop cohesive cultures by tapping into the enormous strengths that can come through diversity.

Thank you

